

Internationalist Theatre's (initially known as New Internationalist Theatre) production of Brecht's 'Mother Courage' in London May 1982 was noteworthy and important for many reasons:

Christopher Hudson of the Evening Standard points out 5 reasons:

- 1) "Three hours of Brecht in a basement of an old Charing Cross Hospital might sound like noble endurance indeed but ..(this production) is not so lightly to be dismissed "
- 2) "all great plays respond to serious , workmanlike performance by actors who are prepared to let it speak for itself"
- 3) "...the humour and Fatalism of the play come through strongly"
- 4) Margaret Robertson's in the title role , " great achievement is to keep our sympathy as well as our attention "
- 5) "Peter Stevenson directs ... with a good eye for the telling detail"

—THE STANDARD, THURSDAY, MAY 6, 1982

Letting Mother take the load

THREE hours of Brecht in a basement of the old Charing Cross hospital might sound like noble endurance indeed. But the Internationalist Theatre's production of Mother Courage at the Theatre Space is not to be so lightly dismissed.

Like all great plays, Mother Courage readily responds to serious, straightforward, workmanlike performance by actors who are prepared to let it speak for itself. In this production of the humour and fatalism of the

play come through strongly and the tight circle in which Mother Courage has to drag her wagon of provisions somehow strengthens the sense of futility her wandering conveys.

Inevitably, the strengths and weaknesses of this play are the strengths and weaknesses of its central performance. In Margaret Robertson, the company is fortunate to have a Mother Courage who carries the production as stoutly as she carries her wagonload of supplies. Grinning defiantly and mak-

ing her sales pitch as though her life depended on it, she queens it over the soldiers and peasants as if to the manner born. Her great achievement is to keep our sympathy as well as our attention.

She may be the mercenary profiteer, who haggles over her son's life: she is also the kind-hearted mother who softens her rasping tones when giving advice to Katrin her dumb daughter, and the susceptible woman whose eyes light up when the Commander's cook makes a pass.

Margaret Robertson is well supported by Milos Kirek's lowering, imperturbable cook, and by the chaplain, played by Renu Setna with an entertaining self-importance.

The music is unpleasantly harsh and discordant. But Peter Stevenson directs very capably with a good eye for the telling detail—Mother Courage giving money for Katrin's burial and insistently taking one coin back

Christopher Hudson

International Theatre's (initially known as New Internationalist Theatre) production of Brecht's 'Mother Courage' in London May 1982 was noteworthy and important for many reasons:

Peter Hepple for The Stage : 1) First performance in London for 15 yrs; 2) Peter Stevenson has achieved a significant piece of epic theatre with his multi-national cast: 3) In the title role there is a portrayal of real power; 4) Margaret Robertson playing Mother Courage "one of the greatest parts in the modern theatre ... is up to it in almost every respect.."

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Art of keeping alive

NEW INTERNATIONALIST Mother Courage

BECAUSE IT IS Brecht's most accessible and, for all his didacticism, most moving play, it is odd that "Mother Courage and her Children" is not staged more frequently. The New Internationalist production at Theatre Space is the first time it has been seen in London for 15 years, and despite the lack of space, director Peter Stevenson has achieved a significant piece of epic theatre with his multi-national cast.

The play presents considerable technical difficulties, not the least of which is that Mother Courage's cart has to be continually hauled around the stage, but they have been overcome with the assistance of designer Mick Bearish, whose setting is always suggestive of a never-ending battlefield, and there is a consistently high level of performance, even if the singing of the Brecht-Dessau songs leaves a little to be desired. In the title role there is a portrayal of real power, with all the necessary dogged determination, from Margaret Robertson, who conveys with looks,

tone of voice and stance that this is a play about survival, the art of keeping alive, looking after one's family, scraping a living, if necessary moving from place to place, while the politicians, generals and the religious leaders ignore the ordinary people.

Mother Courage is one of the greatest female parts in the modern theatre and the actress is up to it in almost every respect, suffering as her beloved children are taken from her one by one, refusing to be sidetracked by the proposals of the Chaplain and the Cook, winning a series of small victories over

soldiers and civilians alike but ending up with nothing.

Among the large cast there are strong performances from Milos Kirek as the Cook, Renu Setna as the Chaplain whose faith is in abeyance for the duration, Joe Figg in three roles, Stephen Tiller as Elif and, in particular, from Josephine Welcome as the dumb Katrin, acting mainly with her expressive eyes and suggesting silent agonies which only Mother Courage can understand.

Peter Hepple

Rising to Brecht's

Mother Courage and her Children. (Theatre Space, King William IV St.).

THIS production by the New Internationalist Theatre, directed by Peter Stevenson, is a more than adequate response to the demands of Brecht's most famous, most difficult, and greatest play.

The panorama of the Thirty Years' War is played out in the restricted ambience of this basement theatre without any feel-

plays and players
by
tom vaughan

ing of confinement. Anna Fierling keeps her wagon moving and her business liquid as, one by one, the war by which she profits destroys her children.

Attempts to ape the Berliner Ensemble with placards or half-curtains are avoided; where necessary we are kept in the historical picture by brief announcements by the actors.

The densely argued, emotionally explosive dialogue is allowed its full scope.

There are deeply satisfying performances in all the main parts — especially Margaret Robinson's Courage, Milos Kirek's Cook, and Renu Sitna's Chaplain. And every moment and movement of Josephine Welcome's Kattrin is unforgettable, rising to the highest demands of the great final drumming scene.

The use of music is again economical and effective; although no actor nor actress here would claim to be a great singer, they cope well with Paul Dessau's Lutheran singspiel:

"Christians awake, the winter's gone,

The snows depart, the dead sleep on . . ."

Worth seeing at Theatre Space: Mother Courage and Her Children, Brecht's earnest, if unwieldy, anti-war epic of a camp follower and her three fated offspring.

Margaret Robertson puts in a good performance as the battered mother who strives and fails to keep her children fed and safe from war. She has a suitably wiry frame, with a husky voice which endears itself to the impression of feisty maternalism, but does little to embellish Brecht's songs, rather tedious litanies to the horrors of fighting. The songs are intended, I suppose, to add to the fabled Verfremdungseffekt (literally, an 'alienation effect') designed to distract the audience from getting too wrapped up with the fate of the characters and to dwell more on the many intellectual issues raised.

Generally the play fits in well with Theatre Space's tiny stage, even if the immediacy of the final, swift-changing scenes is lessened by the venue's technical restrictions. The cast, from New Internationalist Theatre, is made from experienced actors from all over the world, and 'perhaps their very cosmopolitanism helps to bring out new textures from a familiar dish. The play runs until Sunday (see listing for details).

Richard Ingham

Where to Go

May 13

1982

`MOTHER COURAGE`s` MULTI-RACIAL AND MULTI-NATIONAL CASTING MAKES HISTORY

Malcolm Hay drama critic for London`s `Time Out` magazine (13<sup>th</sup> May 1982, page 10 ) was scathing about Internationalist Theatre`s (initially known as New Internationalist Theatre) multi-racial and multi-national casting policy in Brecht`s Mother Courage` production directed by Peter Stevenson .

the casting only inspires a whole host of irreverent questions: what on earth, say, is an American sergeant doing in seventeenth century Europe? And how did a Pakistani chaplain get into the Swedish army? (Malcolm Hay)

The Internationalist Theatre company cast found Malcolm Hay`s comments so offensive that Angelique Rockas(the founder of the company) went to the then drama editor of Time Out Ann McFerran and requested that the full review be withdrawn from publication in Time Out during the run of the performance. Ann McFerran complied with this demand.

The question posed : `How does the race of an actor relate to the nationality of the part he is playing?

In an production of ` Mother Courage` with a cast of only Caucasian English speaking actors , one can similarly pose the question `how did a English chaplain get into the Swedish army?`

This casting policy started ripples of change in the casting landscape of London theatre

Casting directors asking why is she (Angelique Rockas) doing this? Now it is standard policy.

Theatrespace 48 William IV St.
WC2 (836 2035) Charing
Cross tube. To Sun at 7.30,
£2.25, plus 25p:

'Mother Courage' by Brecht,
presented by New

Internationalist Theatre (NIT)

With the Falklands Crisis and

the Women Live festival on

us at the same time it's

singularly appropriate to be

presenting Brecht's drama of

war and feminine resilience.

New Internationalist have a

policy of multi-racial casting

which for once makes sense

— emphasising the chancy

meetings of a world caught

up in conflict. The company

have chosen to use Paul

Dessau's original score which

taxes nearly all their

capabilities and results in

some raucous and tuneless

singing; except for the voice

of Milos Kirek as the Cook

which has the requisite

unselfconscious sure tone.

Event

May 13 1982



